

Digital Humanities or Hypercolonial Studies?*

Amelia Sanz

Complutense University (Spain)

amsanz@filol.ucm.es

In the Humanities domain, the very conditions of our intellectual lives are changing. Printed books are no longer the main channel for the circulation of scientific communication, nor for literatures either. It is a matter of facts and we are convinced about it: literatures will be digital or they will not exist.

Scholars are already reading, writing and speaking “digital” prose all their lives without knowing it. All of us are digital humanists using e-mail, e-learning platforms, e-libraries... The very conditions of our intellectual lives are changing and the social practices associated to them are too. However, if we can no more distinguish between Astrophysics and Digital Astrophysics for example, why the Academia could tell the difference between Humanities and Digital Humanities? Because fifteen years have scarcely passed since the first digital libraries were deployed. We are indeed experiencing a digital revolution in its early days and we don’t know yet how vast the amount of documents will be, how strong the scale of connectedness, what questions humanists will be able to ask and to answer with these data. That is the reason why scholars are afraid: are Digital Humanities windmills or giants?

Technologies become transparent by constant repetition of movements and winds of progress never blow in the same and unique direction. As scholars and as humanists, we consider we are at the right place and at the right moment to point out what the colors of innovations are, who the addressees for devices and techniques are, what the consequences of technical decisions could be, that is to say political, ideological, moral commitments.

* First published in *RICT, Responsible Innovation, Ethical Issues*. 2013. <https://www.orbit-rii.org/concepts/digital-humanities-or-hypercolonial-studies>

As a starting point, let us take a few words I exchanged with a representative of a very honorable digital library located in a city of England, the name of which I have no desire to call to mind, several months ago during an important meeting on Digital Humanities in The Hague. I asked him if they had an Advisory Board for scholars and the answer was “No, we haven’t”; if they had some feed-back about the number of users of their services, “Not really”, he answered; if they had any program on secondary or primary schools to spread the use of their library services: “Not any”. That means users, e-skills, creative experiences were not so important for them. They don’t need them. Perhaps it is time to think about a kind of digital humanism and I am in a good position to do it locating my own experience as a researcher working on Digital Humanities in Southern Europe in the last ten years.

First question: is there a significant corpus of digital content really available for scholarly research? Yes... The amount of literary material available on-line keeps growing rapidly: there are machine-readable texts from libraries, collections and e-book stores, as well as "live" literature such as e-zines, blogs or self-published e-books; in the very near future, our virtual libraries will be The European Library, Google Books or Hathi Trust, The Open Library, the Gutenberg Project..., mostly in English. It could be great, because all those old texts hidden in our national libraries could be available and researchers all over the world will be able to download them and read them and study them and re-write them! This means that invisible bundles of writers, readers, works could become visible, as Australian citizens breaking the White Anglosaxon national model¹, as European Women Writers emerging and breaking the canon². As our colleagues in South America have pointed me out, even if those important virtual libraries have not opened all their materials, scholars who had no access to any document at all before, count nowadays on digitized collections available on line and can empower them³.

But let me take a look closer: suppose I were to launch a research project on 18th century cultures (for a PH D or for a contribution for a workshop or anything else),

¹ *Invisible Australians. Living under the White Australia Policy* [electronic source] < <http://invisibleaustralians.org/>> (retrieved march 2013).

² *Women Writers Networks* [electronic source] < <http://www.womenwriters.nlhttp://invisibleaustralians.org/>> (retrieved march 2013).

³ I am quoting Alckmar Dos Santos head of NUPILL, *Literatura Digital. Biblioteca de Literaturas de Língua Portuguesa* [electronic source] <<http://www.literaturabrasileira.ufsc.br>> (retrieved may 2013) and Claudia Kozak, head of Colectivo Ludion [electronic source] < <http://www.ludion.com.ar/>> (retrieved may 2013).

I will need to have access to EEBO and WWP, the database of the ARTL Project and the materials from the Voltaire Foundation, and, of course the Eighteenth Century Journal Portal⁴. Nevertheless, as all these sites are available under subscription, my research is likely to fail right from the beginning.

Another example: let us say that we want to work on Spanish forgotten authors between the 19th and 20th centuries because, due to their genre, aesthetic or ideological motives, these authors have been overlooked in the Spanish Literature official canon. Digital Libraries as Google Books or Hathi Trust include numerous works belonging to our study period among its digitalized collections in US universities, because most of these forgotten authors make part of the Spanish diaspora after the Civil War (1936-39) and during the subsequent dictatorship (1939-1977). In fact, European copyright legislation has made Google digitalize only works prior to 1870 in Spain, and, unfortunately for Spanish researchers, those works appear to be in “limited access” due to the existing diffusion/circulation rights, but available in “full text” mode for researchers located in the US.

Perhaps it could be better to turn towards The European Library⁵. Can we trust it? Not really, because every National Library has its own agenda, which means its own funds for digitization, standardization and interoperability. Norway or in Finland were able to digitize all their patrimonies; Munich proposes a huge amount of European materials, but what about the majority of National Libraries in the smaller states? The digital divide is growing in the Continent too. In the Spanish National Library, the Newspapers Digitization Program is pending.

Second question: are there enough infrastructures available (that means servers and software, services and technicians) for researchers to apply new tools and new research methodologies? Northern countries are openly developing several strategies in Digital Humanities. I mention the North bearing in mind the investments some countries such as Switzerland, Germany, The Netherlands, Great Britain, the Scandinavian area, Canada and, of course, the States, are making to create DH Institutes provided by

⁴ *Early English Books on Line* [electronic source] <<http://eebo.chadwyck.com/home>> (retrieved april 2013), *Women Writers Project* [electronic source] <<http://www.wwp.brown.edu>> (retrieved april 2013), all the ressources of *The ARTFL Project* [electronic source] <<http://artfl-project.uchicago.edu/>> (retrieved april 2013) and, of course, *The Voltaire Foundation* [electronic source] <<http://www.voltaire.ox.ac.uk>> (retrieved april 2013).

⁵ *The European Library* [electronic source] <<http://www.theeuropeanlibrary.org>> (retrieved may 2013).

scholars, developers and servers. We just have to take a look at the universities hosting the DH Annual Conferences over the last years and in the forthcoming ones: DH 11 in Stanford, DH 12 in Hamburg, DH 13 in Nebraska, DH 14 in Lausanne... We notice three strategies are being developed world-wide or at least at a continental level: mapping experiences, providing data, delivering services.

All these centers are very interested indeed in mapping institutes activities, research teams, current projects, creative experiences..., to address barriers that hinder communication and collaboration among researchers and to leverage the complementary strengths of etc., etc., etc.⁶. But also, it doesn't fool us, looking for needy users. Please, you will spare me the details about the institutions, the initiatives and the meetings our research team has collaborated with as subalterns in the last few months.

They are also very interested in promoting standardization and interoperability, in collecting data and funding all kind of initiatives digging into data challenge, if (and only if) projects proposals include research funders and sponsors⁷. The grand vision for DARIAH is to facilitate long-term access to all European Arts and Humanities digital research data, for CLARIN to play a central role in the Europe-wide infrastructure, for NEDIMAH to bring together practitioners coming from the 14 European Science Foundation Member Countries⁸. Hopefully they will provide open-source codes, distributed servers and mirrors and they will not become significant consortia to centralize data and web-services all of us need, as it should be required when working with European public funding. Otherwise all of us would be excluded.

In any case, we are allowed to wonder who will benefit the most by it. Let us focus on *Europeana Newspapers*⁹, more concretely on their survey¹⁰ about the extent of

⁶ I am quoting *GO: DH on behalf of The Alliance of Digital Humanities Organizations* (ADHO) [electronic source] <<http://www.globaloutlookdh.org/>> (retrieved april 2013).

⁷ This is the case, for example, of *Digging into Data Challenge* [electronic source] <<http://www.diggingintodata.org/>> (retrieved april 2013).

⁸ *Digital Research Infrastructure for the Arts and Humanities- DARIAH*, [electronic source] <<http://www.dariah.eu/>> (retrieved april 2013), *Common Language Resources and Technologies Infrastructure. CLARIN ERIC* [electronic source] <<http://www.clarin.eu/>> (retrieved april 2013), *Network for Digital Methods in the Arts and Humanities – NeDiMAH* [electronic source] <<http://www.nedimah.eu/>> (retrieved april 2013).

⁹ *Europeana Newspapers* [electronic source] <<http://www.europeana-newspapers.eu/>> (retrieved april 2013).

newspaper digitization in European Libraries: they assess that only 26% of libraries have digitized more than 10% of their collection (only 11 institutions sent their answers). But we know nothing about the selection criteria they used to prioritize certain domains, historical periods or supports. Moreover, we wonder if their investment on an OLR/article segmentation, and named entity recognition (NER) should really be a European priority, when less than 10% of the collections throughout Europe are digitized. For sure, it can be a good investment for companies (or for institutions) that are developing this softwares by means of European funds.

When I consult the Yemeni Manuscripts in Oregon University web pages, the Gascon Rolls in London King's College of digital head-quarters, Averroes' heritage in Cologne University site and the treasures of Caribbean cultures hosted by the Florida University¹¹ and not at Port-au-Prince, I must be aware that I am enjoying the fruits of empires, as if I were walking through the British Museum, the New York Public Library or into any other Berlin Gallery .

I use the term "hypercolonial" to describe these forms of technological practices and discourses framed by a relatively small, Western-style, Western trained group of technicians, scholars and thinkers (stakeholders indeed) who mediate the trade in cultural commodities by means of the so called Digital Humanities¹².

But where will all the digital natives go with digital tools empowered by themselves? Because technological innovations are not just a matter of devices and tools. They concern mainly social practices, that is to say, it is a matter of users and uses in a massive way. Social innovation overcomes, for example, when a very traditional university manages to involve currently 80.000 students and 3.500 professors in a Learning Virtual Environment, as it is the case of Complutense University in Madrid: this real and factual innovation is the result (1) of a top-down strategy to encourage (2)

¹⁰ Alastair Dunning, The European Library/Europeana Foundation, *European Newspaper Survey Report* [electronic source] <<http://www.europeana-newspapers.eu/wp-content/uploads/2012/04/D4.1-Europeana-newspapers-survey-report.pdf>>(retrieved april 2013).

¹¹ *The Yemeni Manuscript Digitization Initiative* [electronic source] < <http://ymdi.uoregon.edu/>> (retrieved april 2013); *The Gascon Rolls Project (1317-1468)* [electronic source] < <http://www.gasconrolls.org/>> (retrieved april 2013); *The Digital Averroes Research Environment* [electronic source] < <http://dare.uni-koeln.de> >(retrieved april 2013); *The Digital Library of the Caribbean* [electronic source] < <http://www.dloc.com/>> (retrieved april 2013).

¹² I am adapting intentionally the definition of a "comprador intelligentsia" given by Kwame Anthony Appiah, "Is the Post- in Postmodernism the Post- in Postcolonial?" In *Critical Inquiry*, 17, winter 1991, pp. 336-57.

a fruitful bottom-up movement. Of course, it deals with a certain model of economy, for sure, in the same way that the invisible steps allowing disable persons to get the buses are a social innovation producing wealth, objective and quantifiable wealth, or as much as the Global Health programs are considered investments and not expenses by the National Agencies¹³.

Taking into account the huge amount of data scholars will be able to handle in the next future, Digital Humanities should not become the machinery to standardize knowledge as in a new positivist turn for the sake of the empire of a hyper-reason as a universal structuring formation, quite the contrary: more than ever before, it is the time of a new hermeneutical turn, locating different, interdisciplinary, transcultural points of view in the Net. In fact, as humanists are concerned by telling and interpreting stories and objects, Digital Humanities deal also with giants and windmills.

¹³ The Fogarty International Center, *Strategic Plan 2008-2012: Pathways to Global Health Research*, in Fogarty International Center. *Advancing Science for Global Health*, [electronic source] <<http://www.fic.nih.gov/About/Pages/Strategic-Plan.aspx>> (retrieved april 2013).